

Book Reviews

Biermann, Frank, and Bernd Siebenhüner, eds. 2009. *Managers of Global Change: The Influence of International Environmental Bureaucracies*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

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How are we to explain the varying performance of international environmental organizations? For the editors of and contributors to *Managers of Global Change*, the key is to understand them as bureaucracies. Entities with seemingly similar functions, resources, and general mandates are shown here to yield substantially different outputs and, as a result, differing degrees of influence on the wider field of actors around them. The book's core purpose is to ask what factors make this possible.

Some might find the answer to this question in principal-agent dynamics,¹ or in a sociologically-minded study of organizational cultures.² In this volume, which summarizes the results of a four-year collaborative research program, differences in bureaucratic influence are attributed partly to such familiar variables as the structure of the problem at hand and the specifics of the framework of governance created by states as principals. But the explanation for differing levels of bureaucratic influence is also found to lie to a significant degree in the organizational characteristics of bureaucracies: leadership, structure, culture, and expertise. These organizational differences can be traced, in part, to the state-created governance frameworks that generated an international bureaucracy in the first place. But one of the key messages of the volume is the latitude of international bureaucracies to take that initial endowment of opportunities and constraints in differing directions, and at varying speeds.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the study of the bureaucratic dimensions of intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) received substantial attention from scholars in international studies. Unleashed by concepts of complex interdependence, regime theory, and the ideational dimensions of world politics, and borrowing liberally from the sociology of knowledge, a generation of scholars sought to understand organizational behavior, evolution, and performance. Two of the most important works in this tradition, Robert Cox's and Harold Jacobsen's *Anatomy of Influence* (published in 1973) and Ernst Haas's *When Knowledge is Power* (published in 1990), bracket the era.³ This line of work fell out of favor in the rationalist/constructivist dust-up of the 1990s, only to be re-

1. See, for example, Hawkins et al. 2006.
2. See, for example, Barnett and Finnemore 2004.
3. Cox and Jacobsen 1973; and Haas 1990.

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vived more recently by, among others, Michael Barnett's and Martha Finnemore's *Rules for the World*.⁴

But while *Managers of Global Change* shares Barnett's & Finnemore's attention to the bureaucratic dimension, it does not share their zest for explaining "pathologies" such as excessive rationalization of procedures, insensitivity to local context, or the democratic deficit in global governance. Instead, the emphasis here is on the role of bureaucracies as functional problem solvers, earnestly (if not always effectively) pursuing mandates of global governance.

Following a useful review of the historical literature, the book's conceptual framework posits the influence of bureaucracies to be a function of three clusters of variables: problem structure; the "polity," or governance framework built around the bureaucracy by states; and organizational characteristics of culture, structure, leadership, and expertise alluded to previously. As the authors take pains to acknowledge, it is the independent variable of impacts that presents the biggest empirical hurdle here. Their response is to eschew a definition of impact in terms of power or effectiveness, preferring to define it as "influence." The concept of influence is further unpacked into three distinct dimensions: *output* ("the actual activity of the bureaucracy" (p. 41)), *outcome* (the observable changes in the behavior of actors targeted by the bureaucracies' output), and *impact* ("changes in economic, social, or ecological parameters that result from the change in actors' behavior" (p. 41)). While providing a useful way of organizing the chapter authors' observations, it is not clear that this framework provides any particular advance in the sticky problem of measuring (or even identifying) effects, about which so much ink has been spilt. More useful is the effort to conceive different *mechanisms* of influence, including cognitive, normative, and executive—or, as the authors put it, assessing the effects of bureaucracies "as knowledge-brokers, as negotiation-facilitators, and as capacity-builders" (p. 47).

This framework for inquiry is applied to the book's eight comparative case studies. For the most part, the chapter authors do a solid job of deploying this framework—sticking to its main parameters, but not at the expense of developing the particularities of each story told here. To be sure, bureaucracies included here as cases are a heterogeneous lot: the OECD Environment Directorate; secretariats of the International Maritime Organization, UN Environment Programme, and Global Environment Facility; four secretariats of treaty-based regimes (ozone, climate, biodiversity, and desertification); and the World Bank. Perhaps too heterogeneous: the limits of comparing organizations with multi-dimensional mandates such as UNEP or GEF to secretariats for issue-specific regimes are apparent. One may also question the wisdom of trying to capture the World Bank's sprawling array of implicit and explicit environmental activities in a single case study, much less comparing them to much smaller and narrower entities.

A focus on organizations as bureaucracies is not without cost; there are

4. Barnett and Finnemore 2004, 39.

many places in the cases where the ideational or norm-building role of actors outside the bureaucratic fence-line seems underplayed. Nevertheless, patterns do emerge across the cases. With the exception of the sluggish IMO Secretariat and the “strait-jacketed” climate secretariat, all the bureaucracies studied here generate significant amounts of cognitive influence, through processes of knowledge creation, knowledge synthesizing, and knowledge dissemination. There is also evidence in some cases of autonomous influence on rulemaking. As the volume’s conclusion suggests, there is much less evidence of “executive” influence, in the sense of enhancing state capacity, beyond the substantial influence of the disproportionately-endowed World Bank.

To explain variation in influence, the authors find that while problem structure matters, much of the explanatory power resides in the bureaucracies’ people and procedures, as well as the “polity” or contextual framework created by states. With regard to the latter, resource endowments and formal/legal institutional frameworks are found to be poor predictors of influence; more important is the way in which the bureaucracy is embedded in larger institutional/organizational frameworks. The findings with regard to people and procedures reproduce some broad patterns in the wider literature: expertise is power, as are flexible hierarchies with strong leadership.

As the authors suggest, the stakes here are high, for global problem-solving, for democratic practice in the international spaces of political life, and for finding a path through the minefield of “institutional reform” in global environmental governance. *Managers of Global Change* provides a welcome return to careful attention to the possibilities and patterns of organizational agency.

References

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Jacques, Peter J. 2009. *Environmental Skepticism: Ecology, Power, and Public Life*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate.

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Peter Jacques’s *Environmental Skepticism* provides a necessary and welcome foundation for confronting those who deny the problems of global environmental change. Jacques argues that environmental skepticism is a powerful movement